“I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.”
–Abraham Lincoln

“Someone said that being a president was a lot like running a cemetery: There are a lot of people under you, but nobody’s listening.”
–Bill Clinton

“Mr. Trump’s difficult adjustment to the presidency, people close to him say, is rooted in an unrealistic expectation of its powers, which he had assumed to be more akin to the popular image of imperial command than the sloppy reality of having to coexist with two other branches of government.”
–The New York Times

“I hear all the folks on TV saying, ‘Why didn’t Biden get this done?’ Well, because Biden only has a majority of, effectively, four votes in the House and a tie in the Senate.”
–Joe Biden

“I love political science... I love government. I’m obsessed with presidents. I’m obsessed to know how the system works.”
–Cardi B

Course overview

This course provides a modern political science perspective on the presidency, focusing particular attention on the “leadership dilemma”—the gap between the expectations that are placed on presidents and their limited institutional powers. Our goal is to understand the conditions under which presidents are more (or less) likely to achieve their objectives. As we’ll see, the answers are more complex than most people think.

The course begins with a whirlwind tour of the historical development of the institution of the presidency. After reviewing different scholarly approaches to understanding the presidency, we’ll consider the president’s relationship with Congress, the courts, and the bureaucracy; their influence on foreign policy;
their relationship with the press and the public; and presidential elections. We will conclude by talking about how Donald Trump’s candidacy and subsequent term in office threatened the norms of American democracy, the extent to which the public will defend those norms and punish politicians who violate them, and reforms to the presidency and the American political system that have been proposed to address the threat.

Throughout this process, we will be discussing the last three presidencies and relating the experiences of the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations to ideas we have discussed in class.

**Background knowledge**

I assume students have a basic conceptual understanding of the American political system and its history, though the course has no requirement. Please contact me immediately with any questions about your preparation. For those who would like to strengthen their background knowledge on the history of the presidency, a recommended text is Sidney M. Milkis and Michael Nelson, *The American Presidency: Origins and Development* (various editions; please visit the library or contact me to borrow a copy). Two textbooks that provide general background on topics covered in this course are William Howell’s *An American Presidency: Institutional Foundations of Executive Politics* and *The Politics of the Presidency* by Joseph A. Pika, John Anthony Maltese, and Andrew Rudalevige.

**Instructional approach**

Each class period will begin with a brief lecture highlighting and expanding on key points from the readings and answering any questions about them. The remainder of the course period will consist of class discussion and active learning exercises in which we critically examine those ideas.

**Learning objectives**

I expect each student to come to class having completed all assigned readings and prepared to discuss them. However, we will aspire to not just learn the assigned material but to take it in new directions, applying theories to new contexts such as current events, drawing connections between the readings, and critiquing authors’ assumptions, theories, and findings. The course is structured to help you learn to think analytically about the presidency in this way over the course of the quarter.

By the end of the course, you should specifically be able to do the following:

- Describe the development of the modern presidency and evaluate the causes and consequences of major changes in the institution over time;
• Explain the formal and informal mechanisms that the president can use to achieve his objectives when interacting with other branches of government, the bureaucracy, and the public;

• Identify the institutional and political constraints that limit the president’s ability to achieve his objectives;

• Assess the president’s influence on foreign policy;

• Analyze the major factors affecting the outcome of presidential primary and general election campaigns;

• Discuss how the presidency has been used to challenge the norms of American democracy and what factors might limit those threats;

• Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to the study of these topics.

Course requirements and expectations

Students are expected to complete the assigned readings before each class and to contribute to class discussion. I do not expect you to understand every technical detail — we will work through the readings in class together — but you should read each one carefully (see below for tips on how to do so effectively). Each student will be expected to contribute to class discussion and to be respectful of others in the class.

Reading scientific articles

If you find deciphering scientific articles to be difficult, I recommend consulting guides like “How to Read Political Science: A Guide in Four Steps” by Amanda Hoover Green or “How to Read a (Quantitative) Journal Article” by Greta Krippner, which present approaches you might use to help you identify the most important elements of each study.

This set of questions might also be useful to guide your reading and to help you assess your understanding of the assigned articles:

Experimental/statistical studies:

• What is the authors’ main hypothesis?

• What is the mechanism (cognitive, emotional, etc.) that they believe would generate such an outcome?

• What is their general approach to testing their theory?

• What are their key results?

• How are those results similar to/different from others we have read?
Conceptual articles:

- What are the authors’ main hypothesis or argument?
- What are the key claims or concepts in their argument?
- What are the mechanisms they think generate the outcomes we observe?
- How is their argument similar to/different from others we have read?

Slack for class discussion and questions

Students often want to ask questions about the scientific articles we read for class or share interesting material they encountered that is related to what we are studying. We will use Slack to facilitate these conversations — the app makes it possible for you to more effectively learn from each other outside of class and also to benefit from my answers to other people’s questions. Please note that you can of course email me privately at any time, come to office hours, etc. With that said, I will often encourage you to post questions and/or answers we discuss via email to Slack because it allows us to benefit from the collective intelligence of the class as a group. In particular, I will ask you to post comments and questions on the readings before each class on Slack.

Communication and course materials

I will use Canvas to email official announcements to the class and to provide access to assigned readings that are not available online (this PDF includes hyperlinks to almost all of the readings). You should submit your work to me through its assignments function rather than by email unless otherwise instructed. For all other concerns or questions, though, please talk to me before or after class, come to my office hours, or email me so we can communicate directly.

Course materials

No books are required for this course. Almost all assigned readings can also be accessed by clicking on the hyperlink in the article title below. The remainder will be posted on Canvas. (Note: You will need to be on the campus network or logged into the VPN to access articles behind paywalls.)

Note: I frequently assign news articles and other types of non-academic content to illustrate the points or issues at stake in academic papers. These are labeled “Context” below to distinguish them from core readings. Both are required but you should devote particular effort to the academic articles, which are typically more difficult to read and understand.
Studying

Many students do not study as effectively as they could. I highly recommend Vox’s guide to improving how you study. For more information, please contact the Academic Skills Center and/or see this list of resources from the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching.

Laptop/electronic device policy

Laptops, cell phones, and other electronic devices may not be used during class without the permission of the instructor. You should therefore make sure to print all of the readings if you wish to consult them during class. This policy is motivated by the growing body of research which finds that the use of laptops hinders learning not just for the people who use them but the students around them as well. Multitasking is unfortunately distracting and cognitively taxing. In addition, research suggests that students take notes more effectively in long-hand than they do on laptops. (Exceptions will of course be made for students with disabilities who need to use a laptop or for other special circumstances. Please contact me if you would like to discuss your learning needs further.)

Academic integrity

Students are responsible for understanding and following the academic integrity rules at Dartmouth. Ignorance of the Academic Honor Principle will not be considered an excuse if a violation occurs. Beyond any penalties imposed as a consequence of an Academic Honor Principle investigation, any student who is found to have cheated or plagiarized on any assignment will receive a failing grade. Details on citing sources appropriately are available from the Institute for Writing and Rhetoric. In general, you should always err on the side of caution in completely avoiding the use of language from authors you have read or from your classmates absent proper attribution. Please contact me immediately if you have any questions or concerns about academic integrity standards.

Religious observances

Some students may wish to take part in religious observances that occur during this academic term. If you have a religious observance that conflicts with your participation in the course, please meet with me as soon as possible (before the end of the second week of the term at the latest) to discuss appropriate accommodations. Dartmouth has a deep commitment to support students’ religious observances and diverse faith practices.
Students with disabilities

Students requesting disability-related accommodations and services for this course are required to register with Student Accessibility Services (see the Getting Started with SAS webpage, email Student.Accessibility.Services@Dartmouth.edu, or call 603/646-9900) and to request that an accommodation email be sent to me in advance of the need for an accommodation. Students should then schedule a follow-up meeting with me to determine relevant details such as what role SAS or its Testing Center may play in accommodation implementation. This process works best for everyone when completed as early in the quarter as possible. If students have questions about whether they are eligible for accommodations or have concerns about the implementation of their accommodations, they should contact the SAS office. All inquiries and discussions will remain confidential. (Students with disabilities who require an exception to the course laptop policy will be granted one; please contact me.)

Student wellness

I recognize that the academic environment at Dartmouth is challenging, that our terms are intensive, and that classes are not the only demanding part of your life. There are a number of resources available to you to support your wellness, including your undergraduate dean, Counseling and Human Development, and the Student Wellness Center. I encourage you to use these resources and to speak with me if you have concerns.

Office hours

Office hours are designated times that faculty members set aside each week specifically for students to ask questions about the course material or college in general on a one-on-one basis. Many students come to office hours to ask about how to prepare for upcoming exams or what they could have done better on past exams. I'm very happy to talk about both topics, of course, but I would also encourage you to bring substantive questions about the course material that come up in your reading or writing where I might be able to help you understand a concept or assist you in developing or expressing an idea.

My office hours are Tuesday and Thursday from 9–10 AM and 1:30–2:30 PM. Please schedule an in-person or virtual meeting with me using my ScheduleOnce page at https://go.oncehub.com/nyhan. (If you cannot meet with me during any of those times, please email me to request an alternate time.)

Assignments and grading

Grading in this class will be based on the components described below. All work is due at the time specified in the syllabus and on Canvas unless otherwise noted. Late work will not be accepted without prior permission. (I recognize that our
current circumstances are challenging for many students. Please contact me immediately if there are circumstances beyond your control that affect your ability to submit work on time.)

**In-class / online participation (7.5%)**

I expect students to be prepared to ask questions in class and engage with material from the readings and lectures — in other words, to be active participants in the learning process. Merely attending class does not constitute adequate participation. In grading participation, I am looking for evidence that you have completed the readings and are engaging with the course material deeply (in other words, quality > volume). This type of intellectual engagement can include posing questions, identifying relevant examples, making connections between topics, critiquing theoretical claims or empirical findings, referencing news or other articles that illustrate course concepts, and presenting arguments that are grounded in the course material. These contributions can take place during lectures, class discussion, or when students report back after small-group discussion. I recognize that students vary in the extent to which they are comfortable speaking in class and thus will evaluate contributions that take place both during class and on Slack. The latter also allows students to ask questions about specific points of confusion in the readings, which are often difficult and technical, and to answer them for each other. These are each important forms of participation as well.

**Discussion questions (7.5%)**

Starting in the second week of the course, students will be required to post a comment or question of up to three sentences on each of the core readings to Slack by 8 AM ET on the day of class. You may skip five classes during the quarter without penalty (just post “Skip.”). These posts can be factual questions about the study design and results or comments you want to offer on the findings and their implications. I may ask you to elaborate on these thoughts during class. For grading purposes, I will evaluate these comments and questions for how thoughtful and constructive they are and how much they contribute to the class conversation.

**Midterms (50%)**

There will be two closed-book midterms (25% each) administered via blue books that will test your knowledge and understanding of the readings from that portion of the course. These may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, short answer questions, and/or brief essays. An exam study guide with sample questions from a past version of the course is provided at the end of the syllabus. (Note: These will be curved! Don’t panic about your raw score.)
Analytical paper (35%)  

Each student will write an analytical paper of 3000—4000 words (excluding references) in which you apply one or more theories we’ve read to the Obama, Trump, and/or Biden presidencies. You should identify a theoretically interesting argument that generates one or more predictions or expectations that you can evaluate using historical sources, journalistic accounts, or quantitative data. The theory or prediction can be yours or an author’s, but ideally you will be adding new ideas or analysis beyond just testing a theory that we discuss in class. In general, you should be engaging with a larger scholarly literature outside of the assigned readings, which will help you go beyond the theories we’ve discussed and/or look at more detailed evidence. For instance, one author may state that $X \rightarrow Y$, but you might predict that $X$ only affects $Y$ under condition $Z$. Alternatively, you might test competing predictions — for example, author A argues that $X$ increases $Y$ and author B argues that $X$ decreases $Y$. The citations in the works we read in class are excellent guides to the relevant literature as well as who is citing research of interest in Google Scholar (click on “Cited by ...”). Please contact Wendel Cox, the Government Department librarian, at wendel.cox@dartmouth.edu and/or consult with me if you need further assistance in conducting research for the paper.

In the course of making your argument, you should answer these questions:

1. What would the author’s theory predict? Why?
2. Is what we observe consistent with their prediction(s)? Why or why not?
3. What implications does this evidence have for their theory (i.e., strengths and weaknesses)? How could it be improved?
4. What conclusions should we draw from your findings about the study of your topic more generally?

Other notes and suggestions:

- You don’t need to do data collection as such, but you should think about how to reasonably evaluate a prediction or expectation. For instance, I wouldn’t expect you to code the importance of all the legislation passed under Trump, but you could identify some reasonable proxy of bill importance and evaluate a few key bills relative to the theory or prediction in question.

- Please make sure your theories are not about proper names. For example, you wouldn’t want to study the effect of COVID-19 on the approval ratings of Trump or Biden. Instead, you would want to write a paper on applying theories of presidential approval to disasters or tragedies more generally even though the evidence you will consider will be from the Trump and Biden administrations.
• Make sure to keep the scope of your paper manageable both substantively and theoretically (i.e., don’t try to explain everything!). You should also try to minimize the space you devote to summaries of other people’s work—the goal is to extend and critique the arguments of the authors you have read, not to recapitulate them.

We will talk throughout the term about how to do this type of writing. I have also posted excellent examples of analytical papers from past iterations of the course on Canvas for you to read and included the rubric I will use to evaluate your paper at the end of the syllabus. For further advice on writing analytical papers in political science, please see the assigned readings for the January 27 class, but the most important factor will be your willingness to commit to writing as an iterative process of drafting, feedback, review, and revision.

You are required to submit three ideas for a paper before class on January 21 to discuss with a partner. A draft one-page proposal/outline (including references) should be submitted on Canvas by 8 PM on January 26 for peer review. After making revisions suggested by your colleague, you should submit a 2–3 page proposal/outline on Canvas by 8 PM on January 31. I will either approve your proposal or ask you to submit a revised version. A complete draft of your paper including references is due on Canvas by 8 PM on February 15 for peer review. I recommend that you edit the draft based on that feedback and then take the revised version to RWIT for further assistance. The final version is due by 3 PM on March 6. The rubric I will use to evaluate it is provided at the end of the syllabus.

**Ideas for sources**

Possible academic sources:

- Google Scholar searches (regular or advanced search)
- Citations in a relevant article
- Citations to a relevant article (Google Scholar)
- *Annual Review of Politics* literature reviews

Historical, media, and polling data:

- Roper Center for Public Opinion Research
- Comparative Agendas Project
- The American Presidency Project
- Nexis Uni

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1To consult an RWIT tutor, you can make an appointment online or submit your paper for asynchronous feedback — see the instructions provided on their website for details.
– Media coverage of the president/White House
– Public Papers of the Presidents

• WhiteHouse.gov
• Morning Consult Intelligence
• Gallup Analytics

Extra credit: Applications and case studies
Students may send me articles or clips that are particularly illustrative of or relevant to theoretical points from readings we have discussed. If I use what you send me in class, you will receive 0.5% extra credit toward your final grade (up to 1% per student).

Course schedule
The tentative schedule for the course is presented below. Please note that we will use several x-periods. Note: This course outline is subject to change; please consult the version of the syllabus on Canvas for the most up-to-date information.

Introduction

The presidency at a crossroads (1/5)


• Syllabus review
• Assignment: Take class survey (http://tuck.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_e9UFhUvELsHlpKpE)
The development and study of the presidency / skill-building

Reading quantitative social science (1/7)
- Abby Long (2015). “10 Things to Know About Reading a Regression Table.” EGAP.
- Hints on how to read and interpret regression tables (Canvas).

The Constitution and the pre-modern presidency (1/10)
- U.S. Constitution (1789)

The modern presidency (1/12)
- Healy (2009), Chs. 2–3 (Canvas).

The contemporary presidency (1/14)
- Healy (2009), Ch. 4, 145–149 (Canvas)

Presidential power, rules, and norms (1/19)
Different approaches to the study of the presidency (1/21)


- Due before class: Brief description of at least three possible topics of interest for paper

Interbranch relations: Congress and the courts

Congressional constraints on legislation (1/24)


Enacting a legislative agenda (1/26)


**Academic writing/proposal review (1/27–x-period)**


• Optional reading: John Gerring (2009). “General Advice on Social Science Writing.”

• Optional reading: Tim Büthe (N.d.). “Planning and Writing an Analytical Empirical Paper in Political Science.”

• Due 8 PM on 1/26: One-page summary proposal (including references)

• Due before class: One-page peer review

1. Consider the key questions for the assignment:
   - What would the author’s theory predict? Why?
   - Is what we observe consistent with their prediction(s)? Why or why not?
   - What implications does this evidence have for their theory (i.e., strengths and weaknesses)? How could it be improved?
   - What conclusions should we draw from your findings about the study of your topic more generally?

2. With these questions in mind, identify at least two specific aspects of the proposal that seem especially strong and at least two that need further development.

3. With these questions in mind, write at least three specific and constructive questions that could help the author think about how best to develop the ideas expressed in the proposal.

• Class discussion of paper assignment

• Review and discussion of peer review responses

**Interactions with the courts (1/28)**


The executive branch

Unilateral actions (1/31)


Governing the executive branch (2/2)


Midterm 1 (2/4)

• Midterm course survey (http://tuck.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3Id6FZ4fJ2xEaQ6) must be submitted to take exam

Foreign policy

Foreign policy and presidential power (2/7)


The role of domestic politics in foreign policy (2/9)


Accountability: The public, the press, and scandal

Understanding presidential approval (2/11)


- Context: Gallup Presidential Job Approval Center (make sure to use the comparison tool and to look at subgroup approval measures such as own/opposing party)

Are presidents responsive to public opinion? (2/14)


Going public—how does the president do it? Does it work? (2/16)


Analytical paper session II (2/17–x-period)

- Due 48 hours before class: Paper draft
- Due before class: One-page peer review (pairs)
  1. Using cut and paste (only!), provide answers to the questions for assignment
  2. Using the rubric criteria, identify at least two specific aspects of the paper that are especially strong and two that could be improved
  3. With the rubric criteria in mind, write at least three specific and constructive questions for the author that could help them think about how best to revise the paper

- Class discussion of paper progress
- Review and discussion of peer review responses

The president and the press (2/18)

Presidential powers vs. public expectations (2/21)


Presidential scandal (2/23)


Presidential elections

The primaries (2/25)


The general election (2/28)


**Trump, the presidency, and the state of U.S. democracy**

**The threat of authoritarianism (3/2)**

• Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018). *How Democracies Die*, Intro, Ch. 1, and Ch. 8 (Canvas).


**Public support for democracy (3/4)**


**Analytical paper due (3/6, 3 PM)**

**Potential reforms (3/7)**


Midterm 2 (3/13, 8 AM)
Presidency midterm study guide

Syllabus description
There will be two closed-book midterms (25% each) that each cover approximately half of the course. These exams will test your knowledge and understanding of the readings from that portion of the course. These may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, short answer questions, and/or brief essays. (Note: These will be curved! Don’t panic about your raw score.)

Exam details
- Each covers approximately half of the course
- Closed-book; first held during class, second during final exam period
- Test conceptual knowledge and understanding of readings and lectures, not tiny details of individual articles or examples

Questions to consider for readings
- What is the authors’ main hypothesis?
- What is the theoretical mechanism that they believe would generate such an outcome?
- What is their general approach to testing their theory?
- What are their key results?
- How do their theories/results relate to those of other authors we read?

Sample questions from previous exams
1. (1 point) Compared to an agency created by Congress, which of these would Howell and Lewis expect for an agency created through executive action? (select all that apply)
   (A) A greater likelihood of reporting to the president
   (B) More stringent limits on personnel selection and replacement
   (C) A shorter life span
   (D) Larger budget

2. (2 points) Why do Black and Owens question the use of success rates to measure the influence of the Solicitor General on Supreme Court decisions? What implications does this argument have for the legislative success data cited by Edwards?
## Analytical paper rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C/D/F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis/argument</td>
<td>Clear, strong arguments that go beyond description, address important objections</td>
<td>Discernible arguments but not strong/clear enough or too much description</td>
<td>Unclear or weak arguments; mainly description or assertion; incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Originality</td>
<td>Especially creative new arguments, juxtaposing previously unrelated theories, or relating of facts to theories in new ways</td>
<td>Demonstrates some analytical originality in arguments, themes, and evidence covered; opportunities for greater creativity</td>
<td>Demonstrates little analytical originality, relies mainly on arguments and evidence covered in class or suggested by sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td>Numerous, varied, and relevant details and facts provided in support of arguments</td>
<td>Details and facts support arguments, but more needed or some lacking relevance</td>
<td>Some details and facts to support arguments, but not enough and/or lack relevancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of course concepts</td>
<td>Excellent understanding of course concepts and insightful application to research topic</td>
<td>Conveys familiarity with course concepts; applies concepts to topic appropriately</td>
<td>Basic course concepts not applied appropriately; incorrect or incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Clear, logical organization that develops argument appropriately; does not stray off topic</td>
<td>Organization not totally clear; some digressions or lack of needed structure</td>
<td>Organization is unclear and/or paper strays substantially from agreed-upon topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of expression</td>
<td>Excellent grammar, vocabulary, and word choice</td>
<td>Some errors, imprecision, or room for improvement in writing</td>
<td>Awkward, imprecise, sloppy, or error-filled writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>